

# ICT, Social Movements, & Emergence of Opinion Leaders

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As information and communication technologies (ICTs) mature, they are gradually getting integrated into our society and institutionalized into a system in which social transformation and technological revolution are in a continuous interplay. ICTs establish a network that eliminates the temporal and spatial constraints, giving rise to new possibilities for social movements and collective behaviors. A social movement is defined as a collection of opinions with the goal of changing some elements of the social structure and/or reward distribution of a society. While traditional views base social movements on collective shared grievance, resource mobilization theory (RMT) assumes social movements are initiated by rational individuals who try to retain support by transforming the mass and elite publics, which fundamentally distinguishes RMT from traditional views since RMT focuses not only on social support but also on constraints of a movement.

The linkage between the focal social movement organization (SMOs) and other related SMOs (e.g. government agency, companies, general public) is key to the mobilization of resources and the success of the social movement. From the Arab Spring to modern China's digitalization, ICT has played an important role in establishing this linkage. Though the Internet provides access to diversified opinions, it appears that people still prefer online version of legacy media (e.g. New York Times online) to user-generated content (e.g. YouTube). This counter-intuitive phenomenon seems to indicate that ICT does not change the role of elite SMOs in shaping people's opinions; rather, the elite SMOs merely utilize a different channel. Such phenomenon raises the question of whether ICT is a real resource for social movements. Previous research has already studied the *ontological* aspect of ICT in social movements (e.g. as a communication platform), while the *epistemological* role of ICT in social movements progress is relatively under-investigated (e.g. how/why or whether ICT is beneficial to the movement?). Moreover, existing studies mostly focus on the *quantity* issue of ICT in social movements, which simply assumes the (non)existence of ICT as a determinant of outcomes of social movements. However, the *quality* issue has not been fully addressed (e.g. the extent to which the use of ICT may influence the progress and outcome of social movements; the interaction between online and offline behaviors).

Drawing on RMT and complexity theory, the aim of our study is twofold. First, we investigate the effect of ICT on social movements; is ICT an *enabler* that drives the initiation of social movements, is it a *catalyst* that moderates the progression of social movements, or is ICT use merely a *byproduct* of people shifting their offline behaviors to online? Second, we investigate how ICT changes/shapes/transforms people's perceptions and collective behaviors, especially those related to opinion leaders; do opinion leaders arise from the grassroots and emerge through interactions within and across social networks or do they still originate from elites? Our study is likely to make three major contributions to the literature. First, we examine the relationship between ICT and social movements from an information systems perspective, whereas previous research is largely from sociology or political science discipline. Furthermore, a process rather than a variance view of ICT helps us avoid technology determinism and allows us to examine the complex relationships dynamically. Second, we propose that in the digital age, opinion leaders may emerge through the interactions and individual adaptive behaviors - the entropy on the microscopic scale and the emergence of collective behaviors cannot and may not be simply predicted by traditional leadership studies. Lastly, by comparing various cases in different countries and cultural settings, we will investigate the generalizability of our findings in ICT and social issues research.